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ABSTRACT

This report describes a 3-week, six-credit, graduate-level summer course on teaching gifted and talented students, which was designed to change beliefs about giftedness and improve practice. Interviews with the 50 course participants (teachers, administrators, and resource persons) were conducted after course completion to determine their views regarding course effectiveness. Most participants indicated a change in their understanding of the nature of giftedness and greater sensitivity towards and recognition of the needs of gifted learners. They identified factors that hinder change in teachers' practice, such as lack of administrative support. Changes in teachers' practice following the course included curriculum compacting, use of J. Renzulli's Type I and II enrichment activities, application of Talents Unlimited strategies, and provision of a differentiated curriculum to gifted students. Although all participants reported changes in beliefs and interest in changing their practices, most also indicated they fell short of their goals. Teachers expressed a need for greater support at the administrative level and from peers. Findings indicate the need for development of a comprehensive program mandated by governmental departments of education and development of a professional forum for maintaining enthusiasm and sharing ideas. More research exploring the relationship between changes in teachers' beliefs and practice is urged. (Contains 15 references.) (CR)

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What it means to be Gifted: Changing Beliefs, Changing Practice

by

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Interest in, and support for gifted education has been cyclical for many decades (Davis & Rimm, 1994). Few would argue that despite pockets of interest, general support for gifted programs is presently in a doldrums phase (Purcell, 1995; Renzulli, 1994). The reasons appear to be philosophical as well as economic (Sapon, & Shevin, 1995). Some of this disinterest may be attributable to the fact that most teachers receive modest if any education specifically related to the needs of gifted students. Not surprisingly then most make few curricular modifications, such as compacting curriculum, modifying assignments and asking higher level questions to meet the needs of these students (Archambault, Westberg, Brown, Hallmark, Zhang, Emmons, 1993). This is true of regular classroom teachers even in schools that have formal programs for gifted students. However, research has also demonstrated that training, especially when it is combined with ongoing support and coaching, results in changes in classroom practice. (Hannenin, 1988).

In this area as in many others, gifted students are a marginalized population. The school districts are largely rural, sparsely populated, and, by most standards, poor. Only a small minority have a person designated with even part-time responsibilities for this population. Many teachers, as elsewhere, subscribe to the common myths that gifted students will make it on their own, *gifted* is synonymous with *prodigy*, or that gifted students do everything well or are social misfits (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1994). Neither are educators immune to the anti intellectualism pervasive in our society.

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The Institute

In the summer of 1995, the Faculty of Education of a regional university organized a 3 week, 6 credit, graduate-level, institute-style, course entitled, *Teaching Gifted and Talented Students*. Although it was similar in some ways to a traditional course, it was different in others. We preferred the term "institute" because it was offered on a credit/noncredit basis and it combined lectures, small-group work, guest presentations, and discussions over an eight hour period each day. In addition, the teaching team incorporated a number of social events, the culmination of which was a steak and salmon barbeque.

Traditionally, giftedness was equated with high intelligence. Renzulli and Reis (1985) argue that those who research and work with gifted learners contend this criteria excluded many gifted people. In the same light, the whole conception of *intelligence* was re-examined and broadened (Gardner, 1985; Sternberg, 1986). Renzulli's Schoolwide Enrichment Model (Renzulli & Reis, 1985) provided a framework for the institute, but emphasis was placed on specific aspects of the model which could be utilized in the absence of a formal schoolwide program.

In the final assignment for the institute, the instructors asked students to specify in both concrete and practical terms, ways in which they planned to utilize the knowledge and insights they had gained from the Institute, in the 'real world' of their classrooms. These documents provided part of the framework when we asked them eight months later what practices they had actually been able to implement.

Research Question

One purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which the intense, practice-focused, 3 week summer institute actually influenced both practice and beliefs. We

were interested in the extent to which these teachers, administrators, and resource persons were able to translate theory and plans into practice. Would participants be open to new definitions and ways of talking about giftedness? Were steps being taken to identify and work with gifted learners? What kinds of things supported or were barriers to their success? Was an institute sufficient or was some type of ongoing interaction necessary?

Research Methods

We used a qualitative approach to describe the ways in which participants' beliefs and practice were influenced by the institute. As educators, we believe those who work with gifted learners in schools and school systems have diverse perspectives about giftedness and that interviews would provide the best understanding of their perspectives. Most of the institute participants lived a considerable distance from the university. Since we wanted everyone to have an opportunity to provide comments, a questionnaire accompanied by a few personal interviews were chosen as the most effective strategies for collecting information.

The Participants

Fifty teachers, administrators, and resource persons participated in the summer institute on teaching gifted and talented students. When asked during the interviews if people attended because they were interested or because it was the only course that fit their schedule, everyone indicated that most of the participants enrolled the course because they were interested. One person said, "I would probably say 75-80% took it because they had the interest because I think it's out there and we've got to deal with it (giftedness) and we haven't." Even so, no one who responded to the questionnaire or agreed to be interviewed could (or would) name anyone specifically who had mentioned not wanting to learn more about giftedness.

There were 35 women participating in the institute and 15 men. Thirty-nine were the only person from their school while 12 had one or more school colleagues attending. Of the 50 people attending, 7 were from schools and districts with an interest in gifted education; 43 were from schools and districts with no known interest. The majority of the participants, 43, were from the province, only 7 were from surrounding provinces. Although nine were not returning to schools because they had academic leaves or new positions, 41 did return to their schools. Of the participants who taught, 31 worked at the elementary school level and 13 at the secondary level. One participant was an administrator and 6 were resource persons.

The Questionnaire

Survey researchers suggest open-ended questions be used to explore areas where little is known about the topic or where the researcher thinks the understanding is incomplete (Sudman, 1982; Worthen & Sanders, 1987). We developed eight open-ended questions to explore the ways in which participants beliefs about giftedness and changes in practice were influenced by the course. Additionally, we designed one question using a scale of one to ten to capture the degree of change participants claimed the institute had on their beliefs about giftedness. We accompanied this scale with an open-ended question. We also asked participants to send copies of a paper they wrote describing what they wanted to accomplish when they returned to their schools and examples of any activities or materials they had developed and/or used.

Of the fifty participants to whom we sent the questionnaire and envelopes, twenty-three responded. We photocopied questionnaires with the names removed. The responses to each question were transcribed by question with the respondents number used to identify their statements. Next, the statements were coded and sorted by

categories determined first, by the research questions and secondly, from the data including surprising comments and negative cases.

We used a descriptive analysis approach similar to Strauss's (1987) diagramming to identify, describe and verify subcategories. We continued to analyse the data until we were satisfied that all the participants responses fit the categories we identified as describing participants perspectives or identified for further study.

Interviews

We designed the interview protocols to further elaborate categories, gaps in partially developed categories and questions which arose from analysing the questionnaire responses. Interviews allowed participants an opportunity to expand on their questionnaire responses and share the ideas and work they had developed since the institute ended. In addition, if the participant had not returned the questionnaire we also asked some of those questions. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

We conducted interviews with participants who were within a days drive of the university. We selected participants who had and had not responded to the questionnaire, who were and were not from school systems with a history of supporting gifted programs, who were from schools with more than one teacher attending the institute, and who had sent in examples of activities or gifted programs the researchers wanted to here more about. After we asked people to participate in the interviews, three of them sent us completed questionnaires. As a result, we only interviewed two people who did not respond to the questionnaire. We interviewed 5 people who were from school systems with a history of supporting gifted programs and, of those, three were from the same school. We interviewed two others who sent in a number of examples of activities they had developed since the institute. Two

participants we interviewed were on academic leave and did not return to the school that next year. We interviewed three of the participants in their home school, six at the university.

We reviewed each of the interview transcriptions for accuracy. Our initial coding was guided by the analysis of the questionnaire responses, however, some categories were rejected and new subcategories arose as a result of the details provided by participants during the interviews. We revised diagrams as categories were dropped, combined, and/or created or as new relationships among categories became apparent. We continually asked ourselves, "What makes us believe this is what's going on?" Throughout, we revisited the data to find support for each interpretive statement that arose including the conclusions.

We wrote the paper collaboratively; each taking responsibility for aspects of the paper but returning to the data together and discussing evidence, order of argument, and language throughout the process. The challenge of mixing voices both strengthened and hindered the research process. Collaborative research takes longer the more voices involved. However, the triangulation and struggle for shared agreement, as opposed to compromise, strengthened our belief that we captured participant's beliefs and work, as well as our own research arguments.

Changing Beliefs

Almost everyone who responded to our questionnaire or agreed to be interviewed indicated that their beliefs about giftedness and gifted learners changed in some way. Of those completing the questionnaire, nearly half described the changes in their beliefs as substantially revised; these participants circled eight, nine, or ten with ten meaning totally revised. Approximately one third described some changes in their

beliefs, circling five, six or seven. A few said the course confirmed rather than changed their beliefs or had little affect by circling zero, one, two or three, with zero meaning no change. All, but two, of those interviewed indicated the course had influenced their beliefs about gifted in some way. The major changes they described were a broader and more encompassing definition of "giftedness" beyond simple high academic achievement and a greater sensitivity to the needs of these students including a recognition that virtually all giftedness requires nurturing.

Prior Beliefs About Gifted

Many of the participants described their's and other teachers' prior beliefs about gifted learners, although this is not a question we asked directly. One belief was, "gifted children are sitting in the classroom bored and we're losing them." Another teacher described a girl in school who had special courses for math and language arts, but joined students in the classroom the rest of the day, "She was a very sad little girl because I mean she was bored to tears." She went on to say the girl's teacher, who had also attended the institute felt badly, "He realizes now, but at the time it was just like she's almost a nuisance. You know, like she's so bright, just let her read a book or something."

Another belief participants reported about their colleagues, was that gifted learners receive too much attention, "Oh, the smart kids get everything." Others added that their peers believed "those children feel they they're elite, and special, and better than others." The participants who described gifted students as being ignored and getting too much were from the same school.

Others felt there were only a few gifted learners and, further, they could learn on their own and take care of themselves. One person said, "I believed that gifted children

were a very distinct, rare population..." Two others said, "I was under the impression that these children were somehow superior at everything. I also over estimated their emotional and social maturity;" and "Those people who didn't take part in the course, they believe they (gifted learners) have a God-given talent and they should go with it and do it on their own. That's the way it should be."

The last belief participants described was that gifted learners were determined by academic performance. One teacher commented, "I basically thought of high academic performance as gifted learners. There were gifted artists, painters and musicians, but I did not see these talents as part of school academics." These prior beliefs helped us understand the kinds of changes in beliefs and practice participants reported.

Understanding the Nature of Giftedness

Most participants indicated a change in their understanding of the nature of giftedness, including a change in their beliefs about the nature of gifted learners. These participants described their current beliefs about the nature of giftedness as much more encompassing. They said things like, "I've learned that there are many areas of giftedness, not just intellect, and that students can be gifted in one area and not another. There are many kinds of giftedness." For example, one person wrote, "Firstly, I now realize that giftedness is not just for geniuses and does not always display itself on a daily basis. Many "gifted" students don't even know that they are gifted." Another participant, seemed to capture the emergence of their new awareness:

> There were a lot of profound light bulbs going on all over the place. People, would go for coffee or we'd pop down for a muffin or whatever during breaks, and just different people saying "gee, you know, I didn't realize that, that's really interesting". Maybe we didn't have much time to discuss it or any time

> to discuss it, but people would make those kinds of comments. Sometimes, there was sort of this sense of profound awe that they were thinking in a very different way. And a lot of people, I think, were quite surprised and glad to be better informed.

Teachers mentioned that they were better able to identify more of their students as gifted and understand the problems gifted students faced in the classroom. For example, two participants commented, "I did not realize how little this was being addressed in class. I didn't realize the impact "bored" G&T students were having on classroom discipline;" and "I could read and reread those forms and handouts, always revising my strategies. I see many more kids in my class who I recognize as gifted in some direction. I hope I am able to connect better with them and their strengths."

A few teachers, also described a change in attitude towards giftedness. One participant said, "I think there were people who... I know of some people who were intimidated with the...have always been intimidated by the top students and always felt that they can't do justice to those kinds of students and I think the course gave them confidence." Another person wrote, "I am less intimidated, less fearful of gifted learners."

Sensitivity towards and Recognition of the Needs of Gifted Learners

Another group of respondents described the changes in their beliefs as becoming more sensitive to and responsible for the needs of gifted learners. For example, teachers commented, "I now realize that gifted students need help to realize their gifts and display them more frequently;" and "Teachers have a responsibility to nurture these gifted areas. The environment will impact the level of development in the area of giftedness;" and "I'd say the course certainly had a fair impact on my beliefs, at least a

direction in which I could start making some improvements with my students that I deal with and those who I believe are gifted and talented students. So the impact on say a scale of one to ten? Would be somewhere between seven and nine." One group of teachers, who were ending the special pull-out program their school had for gifted learners recognized from the institute that to some extent they could meet the needs of these learners in their own classroom.

All of these respondents reported changes in their teaching and work with gifted students in their classes. The last teacher, who is also an administrator, was one of the two we recognized as having made considerable changes in the curriculum and school program. What seems critical to these respondents is that their changes in beliefs forced them into action.

Beliefs Confirmed

A few respondents reported that their beliefs had not been changed, so much as confirmed or clarified. Two people in particular had experience working with gifted students already and one came from a school district in another province which had programs in place for gifted learners. This participants said, "I think I'm probably in a unique position because at my school we had done a lot of work with gifted children. ... What I learned reinforced those things I already believed." In another part of the interview, this person went on to elaborate and say the institute gave her more confidence to pursue her ideas for gifted programs." Other respondents said things like, "It was what I suspected already," and "I didn't need to be convinced that we needed to give more time and attention to the gifted."

Factors that Hindered or Promoted Change in Practice

We were interested in factors that either promoted or discouraged change in teaching practice as outside influences can sometimes tip the balance between attaining a goal and falling short of doing so. We asked a question relating to this issue and not surprisingly, it generated lively and strong responses. The factors addressed by participants were: administrative and peer support, additional or changed responsibilities, changes in school structure and policy, and personal responsibilities. Not surprisingly the majority of respondents believed that administrative support at both the district and school levels was crucial. Some attributed their success in implementing change to this factor. For example, one participant wrote, "I come from a district with a gifted program in place so I have support in my school, which helps me implement my ideas." While another wrote, " The districts that have more interest and expertise are the ones who make funding, etc., available for programs".

Alternatively, some attributed their lack of success to a lack of administrative support. "I think I would have been more successful in a district committed to gifted education." A few, however, merely commented on this factor without necessarily relating it to their personal situation, " The support of school, parents and district is a must. Without this support, progress would be slow and discouraging".

Peer support was also deemed to be very important and all participants addressed this from a personal perspective. For example, two participants explained, "I wish I had 2-3 supporters here to keep encouraging me to change and push for new ideas;" and "As always teachers are each others best fan club. We have conferred and have a new vocabulary in common."

However, 4 out of the 25 participants minimized or discounted the importance of both kinds of support. One answered the question about its significance with a simple "No". In contrast, another teacher, who appears to have made the most substantive and quite remarkable changes in practice, elaborated at length on this issue in her questionnaire and later in an interview.

She wrote, "I don't think so. I have no other teachers on staff participating in my plan nor does my school have any enrichment program. I truly feel that if what one learns makes a strong enough impact on the learner, you'll make changes and implement new ideas."

When asked directly in her interview if administrative support was important, she answered simply 'Yes' but then went on to describe how her principal was supportive in lip service, but little else...."In lip service, yes, in lip service.... Nothing was changed to help me, nor was any assistance offered."

She elaborated even further, when asked whether it would have made a difference if she had one person in her school who shared the institute experience: "It may have, for some people, but for me it didn't. I was the only one from my school. I guess I'm independent enough that I don't work on that premise at all. I decide, did this make a profound enough impact on me? Well if it did I want to something about it."

Of course, other factors besides administrative and peer support also had an impact on how successful people were in implementing their plans. Most of these could be categorized as additional or competing responsibilities. These included changing the structure and philosophy of junior high schools to one of middle schools. In the words of one participant, "Our school was totally consumed by this". In elementary schools

province-wide, standardized testing was introduced and in these grades the focus was on preparing for this assessment.

Other examples of impediments were cut backs in preparation periods, increase in teaching responsibilities and family obligations. One participant attributed her success to the fact that her professional responsibilities remained stable. She stated, "I was fortunate this year that I didn't end up having to teach a new subject, that I hadn't taught before, therefore that allowed me a little more time". Another experienced teacher had an especially difficult class. "I had 32 students, the maximum, and that's difficult to deal with. I also had a group of children who were very poor in taking responsibility for their behaviours. It took a whole year to bring them to a point where I thought they were ready to take responsibility for their own behaviour." The one "new" teacher in the institute reported that the responsibility for general planning was very time consuming, "It takes me a long time to plan for a day, where other people who have been teaching can just snap up and do it...I was taking a university course, too, and coaching basketball. I'm so involved outside the school that I probably didn't take the time or have the time."

Finally, and somewhat surprisingly, only one person stated that a 3 week course was not long enough to initiate change.

Changes in Practice

We asked students to specify in both concrete and practical terms, ways in which they planned to utilize the knowledge and insights they had gained in the real world of their classrooms. These documents provided the framework when we asked them 8 months later what practices they had actually been able to implement. Of the 26 participants who responded, 5 were not able to respond to this part of our

questionnaire because they had been on educational or maternity leave and were not in the classroom. With 2 exceptions, the others were not able to fully implement all that they had planned in the ardour of an experience that was perhaps as intense emotionally as it was intellectually.

The most common change in practice was the adoption of specific teaching strategies. These included curriculum compacting, Renzulli's Type I and II enrichment, Talents Unlimited (although this is not a strategy exclusively for gifted students) and a couple differentiated curriculum for bright students

Others spoke of undertaking new teaching approaches or being generally more aware of the needs of bright students. One participant expressed it in these words, "Just getting the (bright) children out of the classroom to investigate how the cafeteria works ---anything that makes them feel special. It's a recognition of their potential". Others were more specific, "I have asked my principal for permission to rearrange my classes to work with gifted students on a school newspaper." A fifth grade teacher expressed her change in approach this way, "I was more conscious of what to look for. I also really took the time for these kids --- instead of wasting their time on things they already knew. I'd work with these kids and let them choose things to do ---In the past I'd just have given them more work." Although these may not have been changes with a specific title they do reflect a changed awareness and approach.

The third area of change that was addressed by one third of the respondents was taking on an advocacy role at both the district and school level and experiencing the satisfaction and frustration that comes with this roll. In the words of one participant, "after coming back to the District we were able, with the help of our elementary supervisor, to see a district enrichment committee started with a representative from

each school. I've spoken to Home and School and hope to have a meeting set up soon to get their support to start an enrichment program next Fall in our school. Another wrote, "I was able to make our staff as a whole more aware of the need for enrichment for gifted students". At the same time many also expressed frustration and even anger in their responses. One wrote, "It must be a school thing, not just a classroom thing. These children are wonderful and I have such high expectations because of their potential and nothing happens for them in school---Why can't others see their potential? I'm frustrated." Another who came from a school where other staff also attended the institute wrote, "Within us we have to be more forceful...I think we have to work better as a group to promote and educate the rest of our colleagues."

Discussion

Almost all of the teachers, administrators, and resource persons who attended the institute were already concerned with the problems facing gifted learners; no one we found enrolled in the course solely because it was convenient. We wondered about the ways in which this attitude contributed to change. However, we could find no studies specifically exploring the relationship between concern about gifted learners and change in beliefs and practice.

Without an understanding of these new definitions of giftedness and intelligences, teachers have difficulty identifying gifted students (Gallagher, 1994; Gear, 1978) and continue to conceptualize the concept of giftedness narrowly as meaning a very high IQ score. Everyone in our study reported that the institute experiences influenced their beliefs in some way. As suggested by other studies, the majority of participants gained a new awareness of the kinds of students who are considered gifted. Additionally, as these participants described, informed teachers are more supportive of gifted students and programs (Thomas, 1973). Even the few who reported the

institute did not influence their beliefs, reported an increased confidence to implement ideas they had been reluctant to attempt.

The changes in these teachers beliefs began during the institute. Almost everyone reported that their's and others new realizations and sense of awareness were the topics of discussion during breaks, social activities, and travelling to and from the institute. This sense of "awe" as one participant described the reactions she saw translated for some participants into a sense of responsibility for attending to the needs of gifted students in their classes and for others, a change in attitude.

Guskey (1986) argues that changes in beliefs follow successful changes in practice. Our study suggests the opposite may also be true. The participants in our study indicated that their revisioning of gifted learners encouraged and in some cases compelled them to try new practices.

Although all the participants reported changes in beliefs and exhibited an interest in trying out their plans during the school year, some were unable to implement any part of their plan and most fell short of their goals. We believe that teachers are critical consumers of new ideas and are careful about changes in teaching. Many of the respondents said, "Ask us next year." Walsh, Baturka, Smith, & Colter, (1991) argue that "change is a very slow, complex process that any reasonable person negotiates with care." We are interested to see if the institute had significant enough impact that teachers cannot ignore their newfound understandings even if implementation evolves rather than explodes in the classroom.

In fact, we were both surprised and pleased that participants were able to implement their plans to the extent that they did, especially as teacher morale in this area is

widely acknowledged to be at a very low point for several reasons: In a part of the country where support for public education was already low, funding has been further reduced with the result that many support services have been cut back or totally eliminated. In the past 5 years teachers have received raises hovering around 1% a year. In addition many changes have been introduced at a rapid pace; such as, full inclusion, new curricula in almost every area, achievement testing at every level and changes in school structure. The fact that this group of teachers maintained a level of interest and that enabled them to initiate an unmandated change impressed us as being quite remarkable.

At the same time teachers also expressed a need for support at the administrative level and perhaps even more so, for peer support. Even the one person who had been able to implement substantial change without either, acknowledged that "sometimes just getting feedback encourages you not to give up on the dream you might have had."

One concrete outcome of our research is a plan to start a newsletter for participants in this and subsequent institutes. This was initially suggested by one of the teachers we interviewed and everyone subsequently responded very favourably to the idea. We recognize that interaction via a newsletter is different in degree, if not kind, from personal contact. We are hopeful that it will partially address the need for support.

In the future, it will also be important to determine the direction of change in practice. Over time, will enthusiasm and interest diminish resulting in a dimming awareness and corresponding backslide in practice or was the first year an initial step in the process of implementing change? Is it a question of trying small things and assessing success? We feel somewhat hopeful that this later is the case because of the

strong support for the newsletter and the respondents who specifically said on the questionnaires "contact me next year."

Conclusion

This institute supports earlier contentions that conceptions of giftedness can be changed. Additionally, our work indicates that given a supportive environment teachers and other educators can develop strategies and programs that begin to acknowledge the needs of gifted learners. As these participants point out, developing a comprehensive program requires a mandate from governmental Departments of Education and a professional forum for maintaining enthusiasm and sharing ideas.

This study suggests the need for more research exploring the relationship between changes in teachers' beliefs and changes in practice. As well, we need a better understanding of the time and conditions necessary for teachers to implement their plans.

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